

Sonsbeek 71
From exhibition to activity - catalog introduction
Nam June Paik catalog statement

June 19 - August 15, 1971 Arnhem

Introduction "From Exhibition to Activity"

The plans for the exhibition were based on the desire to give expression to a number of directions in plastic art that have been manifesting themselves during the last five years. The tendency towards an expansion of scale, towards maximization as one of the determining features of a work, made us decide to use as the criterion for the selection of sculptures for the park the degree of involvement of a work with the given properties of The park architecture. In concrete terms this means that a number of artists has been asked to design a work for a location of their own choosing. In cases where the costs involved were too high, agreements concerning rent, sponsoring etc. were reached. In this way the principle of making this exhibition could be accepted and maintained: we departed from the usual procedure of collecting sculptures and deciding how they should be arranged. All artists with the exception of Ronald Bladen who worked with photographs, have seen the park and decided on a location before designing a work or having an existing design, carried out. This working method and our awareness of the necessity of such a method has given the exhibition its theme: spatial relations.

In view of this theme, we became particularly interested in the many artists who would regard the park not as an optimal but rather as a somewhat unnatural environment. That is why we went 'beyond the pale' of Sonsbeek and included the entire country as our field of operation so that we could offer artists the location that could truly engage their interest. By making numerous contacts we succeeded in forming a group of participants -institutions, government departments, private persons - who joined in the organizational activities of 'Sonsbeek buiten de perken'. Out of the many discussions between participants and artists (for which our organization acted as intermediary, as indeed in applying for practical, material and financial aid) projects were born such as that of Michael Heizer (Limburg), Richard Long (Groningen), Judd Ruscha (Groningen), Robert Morris (Noord-Holland), which are intended for an existing landscape situation in spite of the considerable degree of autonomy they possess. We have also acted as intermediary for various city situations: Dan Flavin (Rotterdam), Richard Artschwager (Utrecht), Daniel Buren, Ger Dekkers, Hans Koetsier (Amsterdam). A sculpture is an independent entity, but it is also one of the elements by which we can conceive of space. Other matters, too, contribute to our conception of space: trees, parks, buildings and roads of course, but also the means by which space is experienced, such as television, which shows thousands of aspects of that space on its screen. All these are elements which make us aware of the scale that is being employed, which determine how involved we are with one another, or how detached, and which influence our behaviour. Projects such as those designed by the Noord-Brabant group and carried out by a number of artists and architects at Enschede, have paid special attention to this aspect of the space we live in.

It has become one of Sonsbeek's aims to stimulate a greater public in the awareness that such things as visual phenomena exist, and that those phenomena often concern space. Until recently those visual phenomena were confined to the realm of science or to the grounds of museums. But now the time has come that artists are deeply involved in those spatial relations, and the attention they pay to it has long since ceased to be expressed in mass alone. Spatial relations means also: to be involved. And the way of involvement can determine the way it is observed. What is the space between Amsterdam and London? The line between two abstract points on a map? The space you hurtle through in an aeroplane? The space that can be experienced somewhat more rationally when travelled in a train or a boat? The space by day or by night? Or perhaps the space that is seen through an intermediary. The space that impresses us on TV., or that hardly appeals to our imagination any more on the telephone?

We have very consciously not counted this Sonsbeek as a sculpture exhibition because, as stated, there is so much more that enables the artist to give stature to a particular space. And also because a sculpture and certainly a 'sculpture exhibition' is yet another subject of agreement. This workgroup did not exist in order that previously made agreements might be kept or that the discussion of a similar topic - modern sculpture since Rodin - might be continued.

Therefore we have accepted the fact that the communication media (modern or old) have contributed greatly to our conception of space. And that in addition these media have forged an indestructible link between the time factor and space. A considerable portion of world events comes across to us by those means of communication and nothing else. Information is becoming an almost independent phenomenon.

The loneliest events become food for the masses. These communication media have intrigued artists, too, and they are using them in their own very personal ways: as a means of registration and communication or as an independent visual phenomenon. The communication media are housed in the Information Centre in the Sonsbeek Park, and in similar centres in Groningen, Enschede, Maastricht, Rotterdam and Leiden. We have been able to incorporate a number of these communication media in our exhibition.

Film - which was until recently primarily a documentary and instructive aspect of the visual arts, has in the past few years due in part to the influence of Films by Andy Warhol - come to the fore as an autonomous visual expression in so far as it also registers and makes us aware of processes of space and time, often synchronously with our slow 'human' tempo. Film was used in various ways for the exhibition.

1 Films have been made at our request by the artists. Boezem (commissioned by the town of Leiden), Jan Dibbets and Gar van Elk.

2 A documentary film about Sonsbeek was directed by Louis Odufre, the scenario was by Title Tybout. It deals with most of the projects in Sonsbeek beyond the pale.

There is an extensive programme of recent films concerning the experience of space and the experience of human stature. This programme is shown in direct connection with the Sonsbeek park in the film pavilion of the KrollerMuller Museum and the Municipal Museum of Arnhem.

The video film was already brought into direct contact with the latest developments in the visual arts when Gerry Schum started his Fernsehgallery and combined several projects that really dealt with the medium of film and sometimes even the medium of T.V. film, in his 'Land Art' (1969). Since cutting is a secondary factor in video, whose force lies in the synchrony with events, video emphasizes an element that had already become an important feature in underground films: the adjustment to our standards of time. Moments in time are no longer synthesized and therefore accelerated into a brilliant film sequence. Cubist or surrealist composition in the art of film-making has been replaced by a succession determined by a natural course of events. Many - particularly American - artists are exploiting the medium and have arrived at an autonomous or at any rate abstractive sign-language that is achieved more often by electronic programming than by the camera. A video studio has been installed at Sonsbeek, and a number of artists have been invited to realize their projects there. It will eventually be possible for other artists to apply for the use of the studio.

The telex is a familiar medium: it is of considerable importance to Sonsbeek because artists all over the country can send in their plans via various communication centres.

The small offset printing works makes it possible to distribute a limited number of copies of such plans in the Sonsbeek park.

The conference telephone will enable us to hold discussions on the projects with interested parties in the communication centres all over the country.

The press has a special significance for Sonsbeek because it not only reacts to Sonsbeek but has also made Sonsbeek possible in a very special way. A number of artists will be given the opportunity to express their opinions on one page of a newspaper or magazine.

The catalogue contains, besides a description of the projects and plans contributions of artists who use this medium as an expression of their ideas only.

In addition to this communicative exchange there is the possibility of direct talks. In the conference hall, where slide programmes are held daily, visitors may talk directly with each other and with members of the Sonsbeek staff, educative or otherwise.

There will be opportunities in the park and elsewhere in Arnhem for artists to create events.

Publications. The Rotterdam Art foundation is publishing Cor Blok's Atlas voor een nieuwe metropool (Atlas for a new Metropolis) devoted to Sonsbeek Park. The Octopus Foundation in Deventer is Publishing two projects in book form: one by Hanne Darboven and one by Ed Ruscha (about the route Groningen-Ter Apel). Sonsbeek's own publications include the newssheet 'Buiten de perken' (175.000 copies) and the Dutch-English catalogue in two parts (10.000 copies).

It is evident that the term exhibition is only partly relevant. We have turned to the word 'manifestation' and subsequently to 'activity'. Sonsbeek 71 is more like a workshop than a show. This means that the Dutch public will not be able to take a walk amongst impressive statues, but that it will have the opportunity of a much closer involvement. A project on the Groningen-mudflats cannot attract the masses (unless via the medium of film), but a project in a daily newspaper such as De Volkskrant or De Telegraaf is a direct confrontation with Sonsbeek for hundreds of thousands of people. The publications, films, events, and the communication centres insure intensive contact. The road to this form of activity has been a long one, and many difficult decisions had to be taken on the way. It has been a road leading from a precise exhibition programme to a workshop. It is a road away from relative comfort to the acceptance of direct responsibilities and open endings.

A plan made in 1970, for which the funds had in part been obtained, was reshaped to such an extent that it had to be reviewed again by the authorities for 1971 as a new plan and had to re-cover the same long distance of applications, advice, discussions, and decisions. Projects that had more or less been housed in the park, were set up on a larger scale and more satisfactorily elsewhere in the country, but required entirely new contacts, long drawn-out negotiations and so forth. A plan for realization was reduced to point of departure for activities. We went from product to process. That is what we wanted and still want. The invited artists did not come to Sonsbeek as to the inevitable end of the road, but as to a place where they could start out from. The public that will visit Sonsbeek will have to use what they see to form their own ideas - they must not expect to see a collection of aesthetic sights.

Realization

Many artists, institutions and private persons have been involved in the realization of Sonsbeek. It was in fact a most heartening experience to see how people from such a variety of circles and with such diverse interests could come together to work on a project. And it was remarkable that everyone's reservations disappeared once it became clear that we did not seek to confine creativity and imagination to an art-context, but that we sought application in patterns that already exist and are ostensibly difficult to change. We are sincerely grateful for this, for the joint decision to work for, a common goal is one of the best things life has to offer. The same goes, of course, for the internal organization. We will, however, refrain from exchanging thanks. May I note here that the work group reached the various stages in the programme in very intensive and lengthy discussions.

Stage I was the plan for Sonsbeek '970, Stage II the programming of Sonsbeek buiten de perken 1971, Stage III started in June 1970 with the practical realization of the plans. With R. Oxenaar as chairman of the work group, the new formulae of Stage II were reached. A group that was extended to include B. Premsele, and H. van Haaren, and F. Haks has worked for Stage II from October 1970, with W. Beeren as executive commissioner. In addition the committees or editors of the publicity department, educational service, catalogue, newssheet and films have done a tremendous amount of work. An important contribution was made in April 1970 after an intermediate consultation with D.J. Bakker, F. Becht, C. Blok, J. Dibbets, F. Haks, B. Premsele and Th. van Velzen. C. Blok aided us greatly at a later stage in formulating the 'ideology'. The exertions of Judith Cahen, assistant commissioner, and Mrs. G. Voss, secretary, deserve mention here, in anticipation of stage IV: the closure of the Sonsbeek activity by the second part of the catalogue. At the present moment we are in the middle of the 'process'.

For the work group: W.A.L. Beeren

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'TV tortured the intellectuals for long time ... it is about the time that the intellectuals torture TV ...' John Canaday said something like that a few years ago ... it is happening all over ... now artists are striking back TV both in hardware and software.

Communication means the two-way communications. One-way communication is simply a notification ... like a draft call. TV has been a typical case of this non communication and mass audience had only one freedom, that is, to turn on or off the TV ... comparable to the freedom in concentration camp where inmates had only one kind of freedom, that is, to touch or not to touch the electric care wire. My obsession with TV for the past 10 years has been, if I look back and think clearly, a steady progression towards more differentiated participation by viewers. In my first 'Electronic TV' show (Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, 1963 March) I mainly manipulated the TV scan-line, which is the prime mode of control in the technological society. I remember, of having spent a long evening with Joseph Beuys and Gunther Uecker watching 'Zen for TV', which consists of just one vertical scan-line. At the Bonino Gallery (1965) in New York City, I did two more kinds of participation ... a rather physical one using a powerful magnet and a delicate time manipulation using a Video Tape recorder. In 'TV as a Creative Medium' (Howard Wise Gallery, New York) and 'Vision and Television' (Rose Art Museum, organized by Russel Connor) the video-transformation of self-portrait and self-feedback taught me about the mystics of electronic media and possibility of changing the interior space of future architecture through wall to wall TV. From 1969 to 1970, I have collaborated with Shuya Abe (a great engineer-artist) to make a video-synthesizer, which would accumulate all my past experiments into one playable console. It was generously supported by WGBH Boston, a leading public television station in U.S. This can grow to a video-piano at every household in the post-video cassette age. People can create their own art and send it to their friends through video-telephone lines and elevate their mood by watching or attaching certain medical electronic gadgets and control their own brainwaves in order to achieve an instant Nirvana. It is nog (sic) without sentiment that I show my TV at Sonsbeek, which lies so near to Wuppertal and meet old friends ... Cybernetics and Karma is one thing ... a network of Hetu-pratayaya.